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Brexit and the Democratic Intellect

Papers and poems from a symposium held at Durham University
13th – 14th January 2017

Organised by Simon Grimble
(Department of English Studies, Durham University)

'This story is about you': Brexit, inequality and the democratic intellect

Simon Grimble

Elephants in the Room

Liam McHugh-Russell

Respecting a Decision:

Peter Robinson

The Experts, the People, and the Politicians

Four Poems

Peter Robinson

An outsider in 'Brexitland':
some observations

Gerald Dawe

Three Poems

Gerald Dawe

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"This story is about you': Brexit, inequality and the democratic intellect

Simon Grimble (Durham University)

Simon Grimble is a Lecturer in the Department of English Studies, Durham University. He is currently writing a book on intellectuals and the politics of style.

28 April, 2017

This was the opening paper at the event. What follows is a partially revised version.

This paper is entitled 'This is a story about you': Brexit, inequality and the democratic intellect. What do I mean by this title? Well, as I reflected on the reasons for the victory of the 'leave' campaign in the weeks after the 23 June 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union, one thought in relation to the 'remain' campaign kept recurring, however just or unjust it was: in terms of actual campaigning, everyone left it to everyone else. I speak for myself here: as an academic with an interest in issues of civic engagement and political participation, as well as an Italian partner who teaches European Union law, I did about two and a half hours of campaigning: I leafleted one (quite long!) street in Newcastle on Monday 20 June and I did one and half hours of canvassing in the Heaton area of Newcastle with Labour party members on the day of the referendum itself. I wrote one email to someone who I knew was planning to vote to leave to try to get them to change their mind. I had one very brief argument with a 'leave' campaigner just off Durham Market Square on 21 June: he called me a 'traitor ... like Edward Heath', and told me to 'go away' (the call to 'go home' does not operate with 'traitors' as they do not have another home to go to), but I have to say that I did not feel very strongly about the exchange. The term 'traitor' clearly meant a lot to the (relatively elderly) person who uttered it, but it was a term I was able to receive quite calmly: to me, it felt like what the philosopher Gilbert Ryle called a category-mistake. I think this was the sum total of my civic engagement with the campaign: of course, I read articles in newspapers and online but it is not clear how far that goes. In short, whilst the implications of the United Kingdom's departure from the European Union are extremely meaningful for my family and I, as well as for wider society, I treated the campaign itself as a bad dream and avoided it as much as possible.

In hindsight, of course, this decision – which was not even a decision, in the sense that I did not decide not to participate, I just did not participate – seems a mistake in a narrow, strategic sense, but also, probably more importantly, it seems indicative, even symptomatic. But what was it symptomatic of? In the weeks after the vote, I was reminded of my reading of the political scientist Peter Mair's 2013 book, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy*, which describes the process by which, particularly since the fall of the Berlin Wall, a process of depoliticisation has been underway across Western Europe and the United States, with reduced voter

tournouts, reduced membership of political parties and reduced membership of trade unions (roughly halved since 1979). Mair is particularly good at describing the mutually reinforcing aspects of this as he considers the relation between political parties and citizens:

Parties are failing, in other words, as a result of a process of mutual withdrawal or abandonment, whereby citizens retreat into private life or into more specialized and often ad hoc forms of representation, whilst the party leaders withdraw into the institutions, drawing their terms of reference ever more readily from their roles as governors or public-office holders. Parties are failing because the zone of engagement – the traditional world of party democracy where citizens interacted with and felt a sense of attachment to their political leaders – is being evacuated.¹

So, according to Mair, the process is two-way: everybody – politicians, citizens – wants to withdraw, into the safer space, to where they feel, in the contemporary idiom, more comfortable. For the citizen this is into ‘private life’ or into ‘more specialized and often ad hoc forms of representation’, whilst mainstream politicians view their role as confined to office-seeking rather than that of giving voice to a group of citizens in society. This process of mutual withdrawal is particularly well brought out in the literary critic Francis Mulhern’s foreword to the book:

Ruling the Void as we have it is about Europe, chiefly the older democracies of its western zone, and the transnational polity of the European Union, but the vision it offers is quite general, as if renewing in its own idiom the classic warning, *de te fabula narratur* – this story is about you.²

In hindsight, after the EU referendum, it did very much appear that the story was about me, in particular, and the culture and society of which I was part more generally. Like many others I had withdrawn into private life: or perhaps, to put it more accurately, I had not engaged in public life in the first place. I became a member of a political party for the first time in 2015, even though I would have thought of myself as a person who was very preoccupied with politics for many years before that. I have participated in – and still participate in – ‘specialized and often ad hoc forms of representation’, through membership of NGO pressure groups. I have been a ‘clicktivist’: I have signed many online petitions. In recent years, as well as signing some of their petitions, I have made donations to particular campaigns organised by groups like 38 Degrees and Change.org. I became a member again of the university lecturers’ union, the University and College Union, in 2012 (percentage of the membership who voted in the UCU presidential election in February 2017: 13.1%), after a long period during which, for various reasons, my membership lapsed. I became a member of the Campaign for the Defence of British Universities in late 2016, although I have been concerned with the changing nature of British

¹ Peter Mair, *Ruling the Void: The Hollowing of Western Democracy* (London: Verso, 2013), p. 16.

² Francis Mulhern, editor’s foreword to Mair, *Ruling the Void*, p. xvii.

universities for much longer than the last few months. I have never written a letter to a newspaper in this or any other country about any matter, political or otherwise.

Why do I raise these small biographical details? My point is to add one piece of texture to Mair's account about the processes involved. In my particular case, my state of comparative non-engagement was not, primarily, a sign of a lack of interest or of a type of apathy. It was, rather, a sign of the absence of a significant 'zone of engagement', either through the life of a particular party, or through the union or through membership of any significant civil society group. In this sense, it may be worth mentioning that I have also not participated in any professional association such as, in my particular profession as a university lecturer in an English department, the English Association. At the same time, it could be noted that the single act which reverses this trend does not, of course, remake society. Even when one does join such organisations, one can be struck by feelings of flatness or incapacity. For example, the UCU membership at Durham, as opposed to the union's committee, normally only meets together for an annual general meeting, despite the many pressing issues facing members of the union. As such, it becomes difficult to frame and develop a response to those issues, because relations between even active members are not strong enough. And this lack of direct relationship has its own depressing effect: even engaged citizens feel weakly related to each other.

At the same time, we could, perhaps, say that the fact of my escalating involvement in various kinds of public and associational life in the period since 2012 do indicate the possibilities of a return to civic engagement by at least one citizen. Furthermore, this is a process that could be said to have parallels in the wider culture and society found in the United Kingdom in the same period. According to a research briefing issued by the House of Commons Library in March 2017, 'membership of the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats has increased to around 1.6% of the electorate in 2016, compared to a historic low of 0.8% in 2013,' the year of the publication of *Ruling the Void*.³ This increase was substantially due to the rise in membership of the Labour party since the 2015 general election, but increases have also taken place elsewhere: most notably, the SNP's membership rose from 25,000 in December 2013 to 120,000 in July 2016, with also the Green Party (England and Wales) going from 13,800 to 55,000 in the same period. At the time of writing (nine days after the calling of the 8 June general election), it has also been announced that membership of the Liberal Democrats has risen above 100,000 for the first time since 1994, with 12,500 joining in the last week. And so it is possible that the symptoms that Mair diagnosed have not necessarily become permanent features but are in fact able to be repaired.

³ Richard Keen and Vyara Apostolova, 'Membership of UK political parties,' House of Commons Library, 28 March 2017, <http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05125/SN05125.pdf>. Last accessed 27 April 2017.

However, if a particular citizen were to be a supporter of the UK's continued membership of the European Union, this civic revitalisation, if that is what it was, came too late to prevent the loss of that vote on 23 June 2016. Part of what was at issue with that vote was a sense that the European Union itself was, according to Mair, an element in this process of depoliticisation: as he wrote, 'even if the system [of the EU] is not anti-democratic, it is nevertheless non-democratic, at least in the conventional postwar European sense of the term: there is a lack of democratic accountability, there is little scope for input-oriented legitimacy and decision-makers can only rarely be mandated by voters.'⁴ I do not intend to get into the justice of this analysis, but it is clear that these feelings became widespread, and have tended to perpetuate the current apparent opposition between elite opinion and popular sentiment. Anxieties about effective popular representation have come to exist at both the level of the European Union and, as Mair argues, at the level of individual nation states, and at both levels it breeds what he calls 'polity scepticism', which is really scepticism about any already existing polity. The EU referendum was narrowly preceded by the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, which exhibited its own type of this kind of thinking. As the man in the TV audience asked in the Scottish referendum debates, 'if we're Better Together, why aren't we *better* together?' This was the moment when panic began to set in the No camp, and apparently straightforward victory turned into the very strongly imagined possibility of defeat. But this particular citizen was asking a question about the character of life in this particular (for the moment) nation-state, and the lack of a good answer continues to prove extremely unsettling.

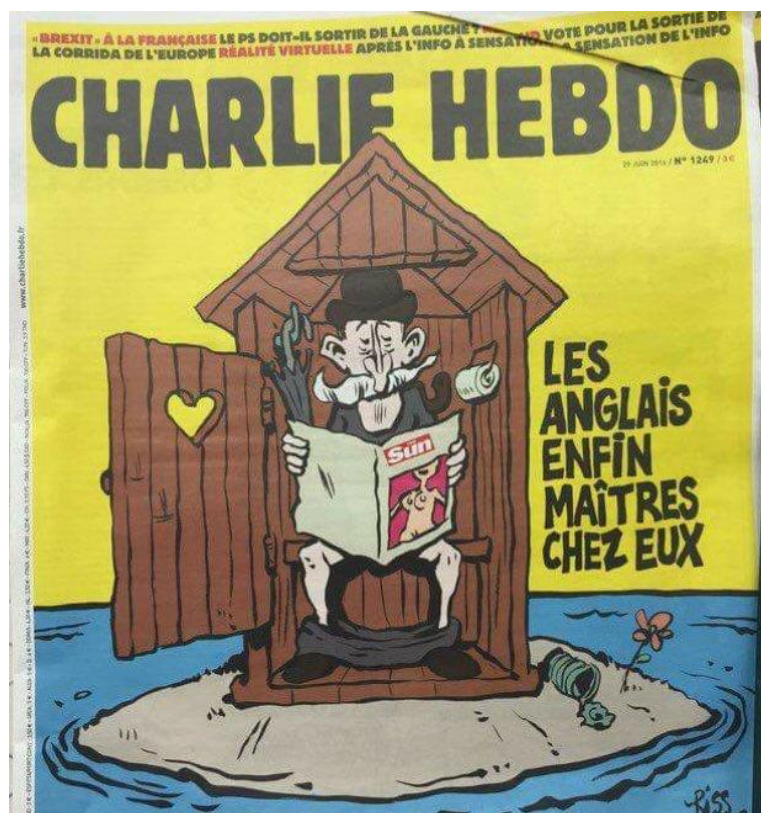
At the same time, Mair - whilst stating that only a left-right plane of competition can sustain democracy in the long term, as opposed to a clustering around the centre ground, exhibiting what Freud called 'the narcissism of small differences' - did not closely analyse the issues of inequality that have moved closer to centre stage in the years since the 2007-8 financial crisis. But it would appear, at the most general level, that depoliticisation and increased inequality are likely to go hand in hand: if citizens retreat into private life they are therefore unable to persuade political leaders to redistribute wealth. In the absence of that persuasion, everything seems to suggest that inequality grows. As the economist Thomas Piketty argued in his 2014 *Capital*, 'capital never sleeps'; without concerted and organised political and social pressure, we return to Victorian notions of private wealth and public squalor, to the world of Panamanian tax avoidance schemes, on one hand, and food banks on the other. As Julia Unwin of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation said to the writer James Meek in a *London Review of Books* essay on housing in 2014:

'At the turn of the 20th century, the free market had provided squalid slums. We undoubtedly face the re-creation of slums, the enrichment of bad landlords, the risk of people being destitute. Beveridge had soup kitchens. We have food banks. We've got something that *does* take us back full circle, a

⁴ *Ruling the Void*, p. 138.

deep divide in way of life between people who are reasonably well off and those who are poor. There's always been a difference, but the distinction seems to be more stark now.⁵

In this context of escalating social divisions, in what the political philosopher Chris Bertam has called 'the whirlpool of inequality' where everyone blames everyone else, it may seem unsurprising that campaigns such as the 'leave' campaign – where it is imagined that it is possible to leave, depart from, the existing order – should be victorious.⁶ Brexit does, apparently, give the possibility of exit, but to what or to where is left unclear. Perhaps it is a sign of what Philip Larkin called in his poem 'Wants', 'beyond all this, the wish to be alone.' This is a sentiment echoed in this cruel and provoking cartoon from *Charlie Hebdo*, from 29 June 2016: 'The English finally masters in their own house.'



'Wants' actually ends with the refrain 'beneath all this, desire of oblivion runs': as if aloneness is the condition that precedes death, which is what the fundamental wish is for. After all, there are no compromises, no power sharing in death: the difficulties of civic life are not in question. In the context of this particular nation, this does have to be associated with what Paul Gilroy has called 'postcolonial melancholia' – as though what is lost is both resented, for being lost and marked by a feeling that it

⁵ James Meek, 'Where Will We Live?', *London Review of Books*, 9 January 2014, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n01/james-meek/where-will-we-live> . Last accessed 24 March 2017.

⁶ Chris Bertram, 'Piketty, Rousseau and the Desire for Inequality', <http://crookedtimber.org/2015/12/09/piketty-rousseau-and-the-desire-for-inequality/> . Last accessed 24 March 2017.

was never really deserved, which I suppose can make the feelings of resentment even stronger. 'I want the empire back!' as a relative of mine said in relation to Brexit. What I imagine she desired were the feelings of centrality and superiority that she associated with that world, even if the attempt to possess those feelings, let alone to bring the empire back, seems an impossible one to realise.

So, if in the depoliticised but unequal world of these post-imperial islands, Brexit could take on the character of inevitability (although it was anything but), what is, in the cliché, the way forward, if, indeed, there is one? I am interested in the work of the Scottish philosopher and historian of ideas, George Davie, who was concerned with the democratic intellect, as detailed in his two books, *The Democratic Intellect* (1961) and *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* (1986). In a Scottish context, many things have been said about these books, but, broadly speaking, Davie is concerned with the relationship between 'the experts' and 'the people'. He states his overall case towards the end of the second book:

The words "democratic intellect" offer a twentieth-century formulation of an old problem. Does the control of a group (of whatever kind) belong, as of right, to the few (the experts) exclusively, and not at all to the ignorant many? Or are the many entitled to share the control, because the limited knowledge of the many, when it is pooled and critically restated through mutual discussion, provides a lay consensus capable of revealing certain of the limitations of interest in the experts' point of view? Or thirdly it may be held that this consensus knowledge of the many entitles them to have full control, excluding the experts.⁷

Of course, Davie follows the middle way here, the one of the 'democratic intellect', where the experts and the many correct each others' faults. Broadly, the first and third approaches could be characterised as technocracy, on the one hand, and populism on the other. In recent years, and particularly since the financial crisis, we have seen a marked struggle between these tendencies. On the one hand, we have had George Osborne's rhetoric of 'there is no alternative' in relation to the imposition of austerity measures – which announces itself as an expert analysis of the situation – and, on the other, we have the development of populist sentiment, which presents itself as against the elites and their experts. As Jan-Werner Müller wrote in his 2014 review of *Ruling the Void*, in relation to technocracy and populism (although he is particularly thinking of the Eurozone crisis):

Four years of Eurocrisis have left us with technocracy on the one hand and populism on the other. The two positions seem completely opposed, but in fact they have one attitude in common: the technocrats think there's only one rational solution to every policy issue, hence there's no need for debate; the populists believe there is an authentic popular will and that they are the only

⁷ George E. Davie, *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect: the Problem of Generalism and Specialisation in Twentieth-century Scotland* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1986), p. 262.

ones who can discern it, hence there's no need for debate. Both sides are opposed to the pluralism that comes with party democracy.⁸

Perhaps it therefore also needs to be said that there is a direct relationship between technocracy and populism: in one sense, technocrats helped produce their antithesis, the populists, with both attempting to cancel each other out. Davie, on the other hand, thinks we really want and need debate; not to achieve victory in, at all, necessarily, but to show that we are citizens, and that philosophy is not separated from literature and life, as he puts it. Importantly, he therefore associates debate with conviviality – with – really, actually – being in the pub. So perhaps the 'experts' need to go to the pub more – or, more to the point, they need to be the same person in the pub and when giving the plenary lecture. These may appear to be trivial points, but they are not intended as such. What I think is interesting about Davie's work is how much he focuses discussion not solely on what various nineteenth and twentieth century Scottish intellectuals said – what they argued for and against – but on how they said it, on what they were like, as it were, stylistically. 'The style is the man' as another Latin tag went: Davie is interested in what he calls 'characteristic personalities' – they were like this, or like that, and in being like this or like that, they formed a relation to their audience who were then not just imagined as an audience, in the sense of being a group of listeners; they are potential or actual interlocutors. In that sense a democratic space is opened up, despite the very many felt pressures on that space. Democratic spaces enable people to be heard and enable points of view to be developed, and not to be experienced as resentments. Of course, the question of who or what is 'in charge' still matters very much, but these democratic spaces can also help make less unequal societies, in that they reveal possibilities of solidarity between people who are not the same, and this translates into cultural awareness and political pressure. This does not solve Brexit but then Brexit is not an equation and it is not going to be 'solved'.

Perhaps the crux to Mulhern's argument that 'this story is about you' is about how this story relates to the future. So, in order to put it bluntly, what should we be doing differently? All citizens could be thinking more about how we live together. Academics are those with some more time and liberty to do such thinking, but we are not going to save the world by ourselves. So there is a need for a lot of cooperative work of various kinds. The globalized nature of the contemporary university (especially elite ones) is both an advantage and a problem here: an advantage because of all of the connections and understanding it brings, and a problem because it makes the relation to the immediate places that surround it rather arbitrary. Which makes them more like agents of 'the liberal elite' on the one hand, and, on the other, overemphasises the sometimes agonized isolation of 'the intellectual'. The view from Cambridge, Oxford, Yale or even Durham can be a problem: these can be views over the world, rather than views from within the world,

⁸ Jan-Werner Müller, 'The Party's Over', *London Review of Books*, 22 May 2014, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n10/jan-werner-muller/the-partys-over>. Last accessed 27 April 2017.

as if these places weren't actually on maps. It is noticeable that during the twentieth century, as a consequence of both a long series of arguments about the disfiguring effects of inequality and as a direct response to the equalising effects of two devastating world wars, that some academics began to write differently. If we read Raymond Williams' 'Culture is Ordinary'(1958), we can see one academic writer trying to bring together the personal and the political, popular and elite culture, not just in terms of content but in how he wrote: autobiographical, but not confessional; not scared of long words, but trying to make himself understood. It is, after all, an essay about a bus journey. My argument is not that his essay is unimprovable, and that everyone should try to imitate the Raymond Williams of 1958. But it is an example of a democratic intellect: Williams sees value in his own response, and so he takes his own intellect seriously. But it is democratic in that he sees himself as part of a society where the readers of his essay have agency too: if they don't like it, they can just stop reading it. But in that sense they are democratic intellects themselves, and are treated as such by Raymond Williams in that essay.

It is not possible or desirable to single-handedly revive the public culture of mid-twentieth century Britain. It is possible to form new versions of public-spiritedness: the environmental movement and the writers of Wikipedia show that every day. This essay and the collection of which it is part is a small attempt to provide one example of the type of thinking that could be productive in the coming years: an example of ordinary, democratic intellects asking detailed questions about the world in which they live. The essay form itself is an example of the type of thinking we need: both public-minded and provisional, interested in varying currents and local details as well as large arguments. How does this help us in late April 2017, after the triggering of Article 50 and as the UK looks toward a general election? Well, we need to raise the standard of public debate, we need much more expertise but for people to speak less as experts and more as citizens, we need citizens to display what Davie called 'polemical intelligence', we need nasty questions for those in power (and not just for those in power), and we need what Matthew Arnold called 'a current of fresh ideas'. We need a culture for democracy. That will be enough to be going on with.

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Elephants in the room

Liam McHugh-Russell (European University Institute)

Liam McHugh-Russell is a critical socio-legal scholar who studies how various forms of expert knowledge interact in the constitution of international economic practice. He has been a consultant with the International Labour Organization in Geneva, practiced labour law in Canada, and holds a Masters in Comparative Law from McGill University. He is currently a doctoral researcher at the European University Institute, Florence.

21 March, 2017



André Zucca, Fashionable Paris Women (1942). Reproduced from Wikimedia Commons under CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.

In 2008, the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris hosted a controversial exhibit of colour photographs, taken by photojournalist André Zucca.⁹ The pictures offer a captivating window into the experience of Parisian street life in the 1940s. Imagine if you will flipping through the originals, perhaps pulled from an attic shoebox. What is at first most notable about the images is the sense of familiarity they provoke, how easily they overcome their relative distance from us in time. Here,

⁹ All the photos I describe can be found online: Becky Evans, "Paris through a Nazi lens: Propaganda images of occupied French capita", (11 September 2013), online: *Mail Online* <<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2417335/Paris-Nazi-lens-Propaganda-images-occupied-French-capital-citizens-thriving-German-rule.html>>.

the shrug and loping smile of an old girlfriend. Elsewhere, the summer sun on your face, the smell of magnolia (or is it jasmine?) on the breeze. In one particularly arresting image, three young girls in matching sunglasses sit together—laughing, reading, relaxing.¹⁰

But then, as you look more closely, a rising sense that something is off. A car modified to use natural gas. And the orchestra giving a free concert in the square—that's a military band. Indeed, there is a high density of military personnel, with each woman in a red dress headed up the stairs—ah, but what wonderful composition!—matched by an officer headed down them. And now, even more disturbingly: that man taking the air, is that a Star of David on his chest? Yes, there it is again, emblazoned across the coat of an old woman. As the anomalies pile up, a single arresting image—a flag, a symbol, a gesture—makes it suddenly unmistakable that these photos have not just captured some general “Paris in the 1940s” but, quite specifically, Paris under the Nazi occupation of France.

Mirrored Uncanny

When the photos were exhibited in 2008, the controversy that divided Parisians was initially attributable to the exclusion of biographical information about Zucca himself. It turns out that Zucca had made his living during the war working for the Nazi propaganda magazine, *Signal*. The collection is believed to be the only group of colour photographs of Paris taken by a civilian during the occupation, and it was only Zucca's work for the magazine that had given him access to colour film. Some objections were thus about the ethics of showing any works by a Nazi photographer—and worse, without identifying him as a Nazi photographer. But opposition to the exhibition was tied more fundamentally to discomfort aroused by the contrast between the realities of the occupation (and of Nazi policy more generally) and the lighthearted tone of the moments captured in many of the images.

As for the realities: Zucca's photos were all taken by day, because a curfew, and a blackout, were operative between 9 pm and 5 am; between 1940 and 1944, there was strict rationing of food, tobacco, clothing; the radio carried nothing but German propaganda; and beyond the city's own depredations, the war raged on, as the Nazis carried out a genocidal program that included the over 13 000 Parisian Jews sent to Auschwitz in July of 1942, with the help of local French police.¹¹ And yet, whether it is families crowded round an elephant at the zoo, or those girls in their sunglasses, Zucca's collection hints at a population so unmolested by the challenges of the occupation, so unaffected by the broader troubles, that they are capable not only of the usual pleasures, but of silly fun.

The controversy was thus more emphatically an episode in the politics of historical knowledge. There was an indignation with the implication of French complicity with

¹⁰ Figure 1 appears as the headline photo in the *New Yorker* and *Daily Mail* reviews of the exhibition.

¹¹ On the realities of the occupation of Paris see variously, Alan Riding, *And the Show Went on: Cultural Life in Nazi-Occupied Paris* (Vintage Books, 2011).

Nazi rule, rather in contrast to the sufferings of the Nazi's other victims and quite incompatible with national celebrations of war-time resistance. There was a frustration that, for example, the picture of the crowd entertained by an elephant—that old icon of memory, after all—somehow distorted the historical record. From some quarters, there was even an accusation that Zucca had purposefully crafted his images to make the occupation seem easier than it was.

My concern here however is not with the politics of national memory, with how nations should account, perhaps even atone, for their role in historical crimes, or with the complex links between these issues and questions of legal responsibility. In that regard, I limit myself to agreeing with Richard Brody who, writing in the *New Yorker*, insisted that it was relevant that the exhibition's photos were all taken from Zucca's private collection, noted that Zucca had hardly shied away from the manifest disturbances of the period, and argued that, taken as a whole, the exhibit served "to capture the paradoxes of the Occupation, where horror and pleasure coexisted in shockingly close proximity, where the active resistance to Nazi occupation was in fact far less prevalent than the feigned daily oblivion of those who kept their heads down and tried to cope."¹²

Rather, what interests me about the images, and those three girls in particular, is not what they tell us about the past, but precisely how they speak to the present. Of course one cannot hope to entirely separate the two. We know nothing for example about who these women were. Yet even if our partial ignorance makes this particular image no more than a proxy for the exhibition's broader themes, it remains a particularly unsettling one.

My own discomfort with that image of the three girls depends on its resonance with my own self-images, my own sense of myself. Against that familiarity, intimacy, resonance, what makes the moment disturbing is precisely its normality when set against the collection's more obviously disrupted scenes. For, as the comfortable familiarity of those families at the zoo, girls in the square, and crowds at the park give way to that "something off," as the disturbance creeping in at the edge of view moves slowly into the foreground, the uncanny returns with a vengeance, no longer provoked by the something familiar-yet-not-quite-right, but raised by the wrongness of just how normal that familiar thing is, and by a palpable sense that the scene is not unsettled enough.

I ultimately want to speak to the role and conduct of the intellectual at the edge of Brexit. But I find efforts to address that question haunted by a question: should we see our current moment as one with disturbances creeping in at the edge of view, or are we palpably not unsettled enough?

¹² Richard Brody, "Springtime for Hitler", (12 August 2008), online: *The New Yorker* <<http://www.newyorker.com/culture/goings-on/springtime-for-hitler>>.

On the Democratic Intellect

To consider the right orientation for intellectual work in an age where popular political campaigns claim “people have had enough of experts,”¹³ one promising point for inspiration is the work of Scottish philosopher George Elder Davie. Davie was concerned above all with the democratic intellect, his name for attempts to prevent intellectual specialization, like Durkheim’s division of labour, from breeding resentment, sowing alienation, and fostering social fragmentation.¹⁴ He described his brainchild as:

a twentieth century formulation of an old problem. Does the control of a group...belong, as of right, to the few (the experts) exclusively, and not at all to the ignorant many? Or are the many entitled to share the control, because the limited knowledge of the many, when it is pooled and critically restated through mutual discussion, provides a lay consensus capable of revealing certain of the limitations of interest in the experts’ point of view? Or thirdly it may be held that this consensus knowledge of the many entitles them to have full control, excluding the experts.¹⁵

Davie’s oeuvre was thus subordinate to that philosophical concern, stretching back to Plato, with what it requires for the structures of rule to accord with justice. Yet while Davie’s subject matter—the appropriate role of experts in practices of rule—addressed the same themes that led Plato to endorse a philosopher-ruled republic, he eschewed the strategies that link Plato to today’s dominant, Kantian strain of political philosophy, concerned with identifying institutional settlements that would accord with justice under idealized conditions.

Instead, Davie was engaged in what Raymond Geuss describes as a “realist” political philosophy, one attentive to actual motivations in particular circumstances, not just universal oughts; concerned not only with shaping beliefs and motivations, but with guiding actions; engaged directly with the peculiarities of a specific socio-historical moment, rather than presumptively-relevant claims about social life in general; and aimed at nourishing judgement—praxis—rather than just accumulating knowledge—episteme.¹⁶

This combination of concern with setting priorities and attention to the challenges of the moment was implicit in his two key works on the subject, *The Democratic Intellect* (1961) and *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* (1986), books grounded in

¹³ Michael Gove MP, quoted here <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36447923>

¹⁴ For a striking early case study, see Paulin Ismard, *Democracy’s Slaves: A Political History of Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017) (conflict between democratic principle and the inevitable power of specialized knowledge solved in ancient Athens by entrusting the most important expertise to a politically subordinate class; to, literally, slaves of the state).

¹⁵ George Elder Davie, *Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* (1986) at 262, quoted in Lindsay Paterson, “George Davie and the Democratic Intellect” in Gordon Graham, ed, *Scottish Philosophy in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Oxford University Press, 2015) 236 at 236.

¹⁶ Geuss, *supra* note 11.

quite specific debates over education policy and universities, unabashedly focused on the Scottish context, and heavily dependent on archival materials from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.¹⁷ The same commitments come through in his 1972 Dow Lecture, which concerns nineteenth century debates between the Scottish intellectual establishment, and “radicals” more influenced by English contemporaries. The radical position was that Scottish common sense stood in the way of rapid, industry-led material progress. Davie was unconvinced. “Suppose, the Scots argued”—and we can take Davie to be mooted his own position here as well—

we postpone the spiritual problem so as to achieve the merely material utopia envisaged by [the radicals], in which science-based technology succeeds in maintaining an increasing pace of economic growth, while at the same time, as the radicals dream, the fruits of this growth are fairly distributed under the guidance of the social sciences...what has actually been brought about turns out, upon close analysis, to be nothing but a society spiritually split between over-specialised boffins on the one hand, and unthinking proles on the other.¹⁸

A lucid illustration of the sort of problem named by the democratic intellect, to be sure. But not a once-and-for-all identification of *the* problem. Rather, Davie’s boffins, proles and spiritual split articulate the structure of the problem in an age where the powers of the modern nation-state were increasingly understood as direct, proactive levers to both promote economic growth and implement definitive solutions to perennial social problems. It is not so clear, however, that our moment is characterized by the same growth opportunities, the same faith in social melioration, or the same nation-state imaginary. We may not be able to rely directly on Davie’s understanding of the problem. Instead, if we are to accord Davie’s intellectual ethos (and Geuss’s methodological doctrine), the question of the democratic intellect must be an inquiry in which asking *what should we do* is intimately bound up with understanding *where are we now*.

We Who?

Addressing the substance of these related questions however demands attention to a ubiquitous but seldom-acknowledged ambiguity regarding the identity of that ‘we.’ Most patently, that ‘we’ encompasses some bounded community, a more-or-less explicit, often simply taken-for-granted, *demos*. Less obvious is another connotation, one which refers back to a community of expertise which stands, if not apart from or in opposition to then at least at a slight remove from the political community as a whole.

¹⁷ George Elder Davie, *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and Her Universities in the Nineteenth Century*, 3d ed, Murdo Macdonald, ed. (Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

¹⁸ George Elder Davie, “The Social Significance of the Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense [1972]” in *Scottish Enlightenment and Other Essays* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991) at 58.

There are hints of this duality in Davie's work. He favoured a distinctively Scottish approach to the relation between the expert few and the lay majority—one modelled on the Scottish, Presbyterian model of an educated minister directing the congregation, subject to the impassioned, “common-sense” criticism from the congregation itself.¹⁹ More than just a general solution to the problem of the democratic intellect, Davie felt strongly that this approach should be adopted by the Scots as a people and Scotland as a nation, i.e. by his people and his nation. Yet look again at the structure of the argument: “suppose, the Scots argued, we postpone....” If it is easy at first to forget that it is not the Scots per se doing this supposing, but “Scotland's intellectual establishment,”²⁰ then it is also hard to deny, once the distinction has been made, that Davie was motivated not only by a desire to solve a shared constitutional problem, but by an anxiety about his own intellectual community becoming “over-specialized boffins.”

Academics should not be singled out here, either. Beyond the image of the academic as a cloistered, ivory tower sage, the claim is that the audience in discussions of how a society should order itself is often not the public at large, but a more narrow ‘we,’ composed of academics, experts, and rulers holding various offices. Some of us may read the *Financial Times*; some may self-consciously read *The Guardian* or the *New York Times* instead. None of us would generally identify with an elite, but that unfortunately does not settle the matter.

This ambiguity in the identity of the public addressed by the intellectual (broadly construed) could serve a paranoid narrative, in which the problem of the democratic intellect is necessarily solved by the elite alone—and always, in the most cynical versions, to our own benefit.²¹ But my drawing attention to these dual publics has a narrower, less cynical purpose. It is simply to emphasize that the problem of the democratic intellect is Janus-faced. In addition to the question of governance—the broad question of how a society might conduct itself—the democratic intellect also entails the question of how we, as specialized or specially-situated members of a broader public should exercise the role, or office, that we have undertaken.²² The subject matter of the democratic intellect in other words is partially about the distribution of roles we imagine being exercised in a complex, administered society. But it is also about how the people who play those roles should conduct themselves. To put the point more explicitly, it is about how we, as individuals who happen to occupy those roles, should conduct *ourselves*.

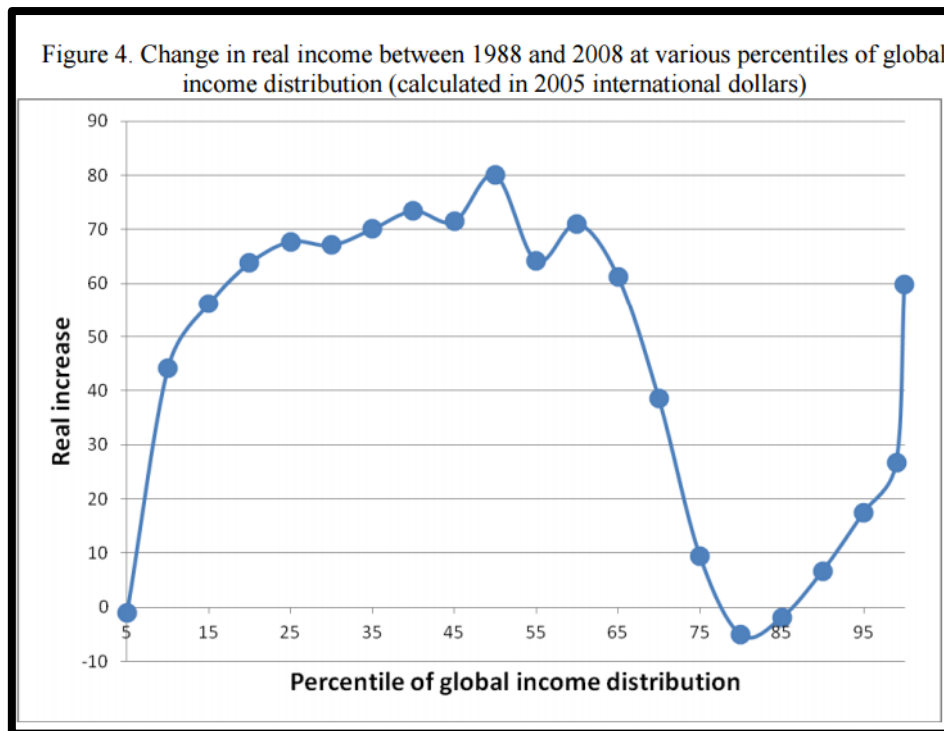
¹⁹ *Ibid* at 59.

²⁰ *Ibid* at 54.

²¹ Compare Richard A Posner, “The Material Basis of Jurisprudence” (1993) 69 *Indiana Law Journal* 1; Pierre Bourdieu, “Force of Law: Toward a Sociology of the Juridical Field, The” (1986) 38 *Hastings LJ* 805.

²² Shaun McVeigh, “Afterword: Office and the Conduct of the Minor Jurisprudent” (2015) 5:2 *UC Irvine Law Review* 499.

Globalization and the Elephant Chart



With those ambiguities properly in view, we can properly ask, where are we now?

Let me start at home. It was Left orthodoxy during my youth that globalization was commensurate with the immiseration of the global poor, or the dispossession of the working class or, in more recent versions, the disenfranchisement of the 99%. The basic coordinates of the critique was that globalization was more or less reducible to a globalized neoliberalism that, by vindicating markets, was inevitably exacerbating inequality and more specifically (and according to some deliberately) disempowering workers.²³ There was data to back up these intuitions. One highly-circulated, often-copied hockey stick graph showed how productivity and wages in the United States consistently rose together from 1950 until the late 1970s, at which point average wages essentially levelled off, despite productivity increases continuing apace.²⁴ When I ran for elected office for Canada's social democrats in 2005, my campaign put local variations on this chart to good use. Across North America and Western Europe, the growing scale of precarious work and shrinking power of labour has fostered a creeping anxiety that today's children will end up worse off than their parents. And it is possible to link these trends back to competitive pressures created by international economic integration. Given the continuing if unstable growth during this period, the understanding has been that the tide of globalization has not lifted all boats, but only helped the best-off, while leaving the rest of us behind. This tidy narrative about the winners and losers of globalization provided critics with powerful

²³ See e.g. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

²⁴ See e.g. "The Productivity-Pay Gap", online: *Economic Policy Institute* <<http://www.epi.org/productivity-pay-gap/>>.

ammunition in policy debates over the future of trade, immigration and financial liberalization. What a tidy model! What straightforward political stakes!

The problem is that, the last ten years have made clear that it is far from the only available narrative about how the global economy has been reshaped over the last thirty years. And the elephant chart—one dividend of painstaking research by a team of World Bank researchers headed by Branko Milanović—suggests a very different story indeed.²⁵

Contrary to critiques of globalization based on economic changes in one country or another, Milanović tackled questions about global inequality by compiling data on the ups and downs of three distinct, multi-country measures.²⁶ Beyond the orthodox critique of globalization, the first two indicators suggested that, averaged across countries, there was no rise in income inequality between 1980 and 2010 and that most of the world's population actually live in a country where inequality has dropped significantly. The third indicator should provide the most important information, but the data yield up few secrets.²⁷ The measure aspired to measure truly global inequality, by comparing incomes across the global population as a whole, at the individual level, more or less ignoring nationality. In the small number of data points for which Milanović and his team were able to compile data—starting in 1988 and ending in 2008—the indicator seems not to have moved at all.

The intuition this should all elicit is that tracking single indicators is not enough. If our question about policy changes over the last thirty years is “who are the winners and losers?” then using one number to summarize the shape of the entire distribution may throw out too much information. The elephant chart shows just how right that intuition is. By sacrificing detail about the timing of changes, Milanović and his team achieved a much clearer picture of how changes in income were distributed across the global population. The result should shock anyone still committed to the one-dimensional immiseration story. The chart shows that approximately 90% of the global population saw relatively substantial increases in their income between 1988 and 2008. Indeed, the high arching curve that links the tip of the elephant's tail to the start of its trunk shows that, among the bottom three quarters of the global income pyramid, the vast majority saw income increases of 50% or more. The dominant reality of modern globalization has thus been not stagnation, but real, measurable growth.

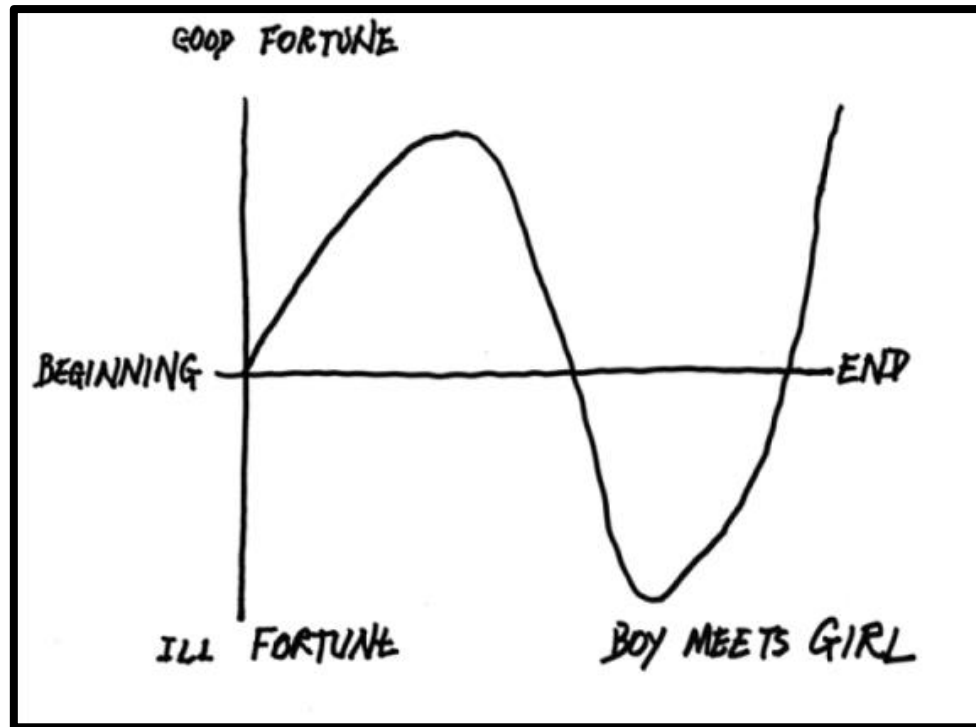
²⁵ The now-famous elephant chart first appeared in Branko Milanović, *Global Income Inequality by the Numbers: In History and Now -An Overview-*, Policy Research Working Papers 6259 (World Bank, 2012) at 13.

²⁶ For a short explanation of these measures, see Milanović, *supra* note 32 at 3–9; see generally Milanović, *supra* note 32.

²⁷ The movements over the last twenty five years are not just small; the measure of global income inequality is highly sensitive to measurement technique. Sudhir Anand & Paul Segal, “What Do We Know about Global Income Inequality?” (2008) 46:1 *Journal of Economic Literature* 57.

And yet, clearly visible in the elephant chart, in the sharp nadir of the raised trunk, is a group between the 75th and the 90th percentile who, at best, saw no change in their (inflation-adjusted) income levels. And it is not too much of a stretch to equate this group with the working classes of Western Europe and North America.

The End of the Globalization Debate?



Kurt Vonnegut developed a way of graphing a culture's narratives, with fortunes on the up-down axis, time on the horizontal. Boy meets girl, loses her, wins her back: fortunes lift, fall, and rise again. He noted that, against the familiar, well-defined ups and downs of many narratives, our most important stories, such as Shakespeare's tragedies, when we put the question to them—"Is this good news or is it bad news?"—give us back no clear answer.²⁸ The elephant chart may offer a vivid illustration of our tendency to conclude that trends which are generally true for subsets of a population must also be true for the population as a whole. But is it good news or is it bad news?

We know what some people think. Donald Trump's story about globalization is that trade liberalisation created international competition for jobs that stopped short the material progress of the American working class, to the benefit of Chinese workers; competition from illegal immigrants from Mexico did the same thing. One of the key messages of the Leave campaign was that liberal migration had stopped short the

²⁸ See "2005: Kurt Vonnegut At the Blackboard", online: *Lapham's Quarterly* <<http://www.laphamsquarterly.org/arts-letters/blackboard>>. The text, though based on his masters' thesis, is taken from his book, *The Man without a Country*, and more or less reproduces an older and very funny lecture, part of which can (and really should) be watched online: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pv-b2l2MNDg>>

material progress of the British working class (perhaps to the benefit of Eastern European workers). Both those narratives were instrumental to the success of the corresponding campaigns.

Yet under the light of a more cosmopolitan principle, these results might be credibly interpreted as a happy story in which global haves nobly sacrificed improvements to their own stakes for the betterment of the world's have-nots. And the intellectual consensus has generally been with the cosmopolitans.

For those most sanguine about globalization, the strongest case comes not from contestable interpretations of income redistributions, but from hard improvements in standards of living. Since 1980, the number of illiterate adults worldwide has shrunk from two billion down to one billion, even while the overall population increased by more than a third. Globally, one out of every eight children born used to die before the age of five. Now it is one in twenty.²⁹ Trump's focus on China is apt, given that, between 1980 and 2015, average per capita income went from \$US 200 per person to over \$US 8000 per person.³⁰ That is not a misprint. It is a cumulative increase of almost four thousand percent, which has been instrumental in moving 500 million Chinese people out of poverty. I am often struck by the groups of Chinese tourists visiting Florence, where I currently live. They may not be typical of the new Chinese middle class, but their absolute number is nonetheless an extraordinary development for a country where peasant subsistence was the norm only a generation ago.

The more sceptical might be rather roughly subdivided. The policy choices that determined the particular shape of integration over the last thirty years have been subject to substantial and nuanced critiques. For one, no matter how compelling the relative increases tracked by the elephant chart, they took place against a baseline of global inequality that beggars belief. Indeed, by tracking relative rather than absolute movements, the elephant chart hides just how very little most people still possess. Even after the "massive" changes of the last thirty years, making it into the top quarter of global income earners requires an annual income of only slightly more than £3 000 per year. Rather than claiming globalization has been bad news, the thrust of such critiques has been that it took place against a history of imperial oppression and colonial extraction that has never been righted, and that much more could have been done in the last thirty years for the so-called "bottom billion."

Fitting the last thirty years into the narrative of noble sacrifice also snags at the tip of the elephant's trunk. In the same period that the north Atlantic rust belt lost out, the world's richest five percent saw their incomes rise by a quarter; the increase for the top 1% alone was almost two thirds. And the absolute changes again tell a more potent story than do the relative shifts: in the United States, the top 1% went from

²⁹ For literacy and child mortality rates, see Max Roser, "A history of global living conditions in 5 charts", online: *Our World In Data* <<https://ourworldindata.org/a-history-of-global-living-conditions-in-5-charts/>>.

³⁰ GDP per capita, taken from World Bank DataBank, online: <data.worldbank.org>

receiving 10% of all national income in 1978 to claiming 25% in 2007.³¹ The global North really did experience a jump in local inequality. Beyond the raw income statistics, there has also been, in the language of finance, an increase in risk without compensating augmentation of returns. Dollars earned no longer come with forms of risk mitigation—job security, reliable pensions, a house that doubled as a stable retirement asset—that prior generations relied on. That increased insecurity has had severe knock-on effects. In the United States, many of those with income levels comparable to their parents nonetheless live in communities desolated by an epidemic of opiate addiction that has affected as many as two million people.

Such lamentations over the distribution of benefits from economic integration have been complemented by specific critiques of the policy options actually pursued, offered hand-in-hand with associated agendas for reform.

For those concerned with the world's worst off, support for increasing trade has long been complemented by calls for additional coordination: global commodity price stabilization schemes, special trade measures to benefit developing countries, and a more liberal immigration regime. While these proposals foregrounded international distribution of benefits, others cast the issue primarily in terms of improving the local distribution of gains.³² Many countries in the global North weathered the last thirty years with neither the drastic increases in income inequality nor the working class desolation that helped bring Trump to power, and there has been a concerted effort to develop and promote policy options commensurate with equitable growth under globalization. A long line of literature and numerous case studies however have suggested that the two questions cannot be so easily distinguished. The rules that discipline global trade or European economic integration can be interpreted in ways that leave more or less room for policies that mitigate local inequality. For example, as much as the downward trend in worker bargaining power has been driven by increased competition from foreign firms and the threat of production being moved overseas, it has also been helped along by more deliberate decisions, like the *Viking* and *Laval* cases at the European Court of Justice, that have drawn the boundaries of the integration regime in ways that prioritize business freedoms over the protection of local labour regulations.

Tony Judt once described the European project as a child of deep anxieties about the continent's capacity to return to its history of tribal violence. The EU was intended to provide a bulwark of *instrumental* unity against recurrent feelings of *intrinsic* antagonism. It may be true that, in the interstices and at the margins, other globalizations and other forms of integration are possible, are even simply a matter

³¹ Anthony B Atkinson, Thomas Piketty & Emmanuel Saez, "Top Incomes in the Long Run of History" (2011) 49:1 Journal of Economic Literature 3 at 7.

³² See especially the chapters on trade and immigration in Michael J Trebilcock, *Dealing with Losers: The Political Economy of Policy Transitions* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

of reinterpreting the basic rules of existing regimes.³³ But the integration process itself has generally been taken as non-negotiable, the consequences of its reversal, unthinkable. It is thus not too surprising that, rather than articulating their case in terms of just redistribution, integration's strongest supporters leaned heavily on the claim that because integration generally provides net benefits, it was the best possible choice in practice, for everyone, period. And for those who recognized the redistributive reality, the presence of that thin minority who had, far from sacrificing, reaped a windfall—the tip of the elephant's trunk—made the global justice narrative a hard sell. More critically-minded supporters of globalization's benefits, by contrast, faced the problem of trying to reconcile agendas that do not necessarily pull in the same direction. Many of the reforms they had in mind would be incompatible in practice. The result was a public debate framed loosely as “yes to globalization,” versus a deeply underspecified “yes to globalization, but;” a “yes to Europe” versus a politically divided “yes to Europe, but...”

The events of 2016 augur a rather unexpected end to these globalization debates, and a return to earlier themes. Karl Polanyi interpreted the “first globalization” stretching approximately from the mid-nineteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth, and the ensuing crises of 1914-1944 as part of a unified double movement, in which zealous market integration was followed ineluctably by projects to vindicate “the social.” In his interpretation, an elite faith in the wealth-producing power of the global market was not only refuted in theory but torn down in practice, through the ballot box success of the New Deal, certainly, but by economic depression, war, and a variety of authoritarianisms as well.³⁴

Against Polanyi's model, much of the critique of integration over the last twenty years worked to unsettle the idea that market integration is a one-dimensional quantity, of which you can only have more or less. The world of early 2017 looks a lot like history rendering moot all the conceptual nuance, broad sympathies and judicious consideration that motivated this research. Not only do the Brexit result and the election of Donald Trump return us to a stark choice between more or less integration, but they colour 2016 as the inflection point of a slide back toward ‘less.’ The last thirty-five years can now be seen as a sequel to Polanyi's narrative, or as a third act, in which the double movement is revealed not as once and for all, but as a cycle of increasingly intense crisis, with the unlearned lessons of history repeating themselves and the great sweep of “the social” swinging down like a scythe.

³³ Andrew Lang, *World Trade Law After Neoliberalism: Re-Imagining the Global Economic Order* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³⁴ Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation*, 2d ed (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).

What the Elephant Does not Know

It is easy to read into our times a counsel of despair. This is especially so given that the rise of antagonism to integration has been carried atop a catastrophic failure of the democratic intellect in its constitutional aspect, i.e. a crisis of faith in the capacity of intellectual leadership to fairly inform democratic decision-making.

It is this looming despair that turned my mind toward the uncanny normalcy of Zucca's girls in matching sunglasses. The Nazi occupation of Paris can be called, with completely appropriate exaggeration, the *end of the world*. What had occurred was not only out of the ordinary but had been for most of the prior twenty years absolutely unthinkable. What our cultural imagination now treats (short of apocalyptic social collapse or nuclear annihilation) as the worst possible outcome had already happened. And just out of sight of Zucca's viewfinder, the worst went on happening.

When it comes to the narrower aspect of the democratic intellect—what should we do—my first instinct is not at all to turn to our responsibilities as intellectuals, in the particular offices or roles that we find ourselves in. It is instead to reflect on the disquiet of Zucca's images, and their reminder of the individual human capacity to go about our business, almost but not quite as usual, even when some Rubicon has been crossed. Their familiarity warns of our own capacity to accept the status quo, even when the situation should long since have become unacceptable, when the unthinkable has happened, and “some rough beast... / now slouches its way toward Bethlehem.”

In the rise not only of anti-intellectualism, but of a disturbing carelessness about what counts as credible knowledge—viz the Trump administration's embrace of alternative facts—many have been turned for insight to the dystopian literature of the 20th century, to Aldous Huxley, Margaret Atwood, and George Orwell. What comes primarily to my mind however is not *1984* or *Animal Farm*, but the Orwell of *Farewell to Catalonia*, and its story of a man who might have otherwise stayed in England, smoking furiously in his housecoat and writing underpaid reviews of books he had little interest in and even less time to read, but who found it was incumbent upon him to instead go to Spain to confront fascism head on.

In the face of encroaching disaster, there is a romantic appeal to being seized by a moral clarity that invites extraordinary action. But if the time has come to set aside words and take up action, it remains a mystery where the front is. I remain open to being convinced that I should be doing something else entirely—maybe intellectuals should run for office, become comedians, make movies. Davie, for his part, thought it might be important for the intellectual classes to spend more time at the pub—that is, with people who may not read the same newspapers. But the felt urgency of the moment, as strong as it may be, tells very little on its own about what precisely needs doing differently.

If we take it for granted that 2016 marks a turning point—a crisis or, in the jargon of the historians, an Event—then Zucca’s photos might serve as a point of reflection, in our status both as engaged intellectuals and as ethical individuals. But return to that conceit of flipping through the photos, and to that moment when we realize just what we are looking at. In our current moment, as we try to work through the inextricable strands of where we are and how we should conduct ourselves, would we do best to see ourselves in the shoes of those girls, forced to decide what to do in the shadow of a catastrophe that blindsided them? Do we imagine that some boundary was crossed in 2016 between the acceptable and the unacceptable, and that our dire times demand, if not desperate measures, then at least radical departures from our sunny days of coffee, cigarettes, and matching sunglasses? Or do we imagine ourselves instead in that moment in the attic, when the proper form of the uncanny swerves abruptly into view, and we recognize the wrongness of what we had earlier taken, with growing unease, as unproblematically normal?

Was the last thirty years of integration good news or bad news? The old saw applies in spades: namely, that it depends on where you are standing, which way you are looking, and on whose behalf. It is straightforward to say there have been winners and losers, even easy to point them out on a graph—but only if you think that people measure their own progress in terms of earning more than their parents, rather than by more abstract quantities, like justice, autonomy or belonging. Once we recognize that individuals are, obviously, capable of thinking about what they want in terms more complex and expansive than a single time-discounted, risk-weighted stream of future payoffs (and whatever it will buy them)—then the important question becomes a matter of what narrative ends up drawing together the congeries of infrastructure, archive and experience, not just what the facts are.

The looming threats to the integration project offer an object lesson in Davie’s concern that the pursuit of wealth alone, or even the pursuit of wealth distributed according to some expert-determined standard of fairness, may not be enough to sustain a political settlement. Today’s political trends are as much the yield of national and international policy choices as are those 500 million Chinese drawn out of poverty. When it comes to that other ‘we,’ we should take the events of the last thirty five years as a warning of the wages of neglecting Davie’s urgent questions about the relation between democracy and the intellect.

A dear colleague once told me that there is more than one way of doing politics. And, pushed along by her implicit message, I have tried to make the life of the mind a way of doing politics. Not thought reduced to sloganeering, rank partisanship, and conceptual compromise in the name of avoiding conflict, but a practice of politics—Geuss calls it conceptual innovation—that involves making the world visible in ways it would not be otherwise. Interests may be drawn together in a variety of coalitions, communities through an array of concepts, and material forces deployed through a multiplicity of narratives. That there are many grids that might be drawn to connect our shared past to our possible futures, is sometimes associated with the strawman

relativism that we can see the world any way we want, that there is such a thing as alternative facts. But the same ethical horizon that allows me to recognize the humanity of Syrians or Iraqis, or the thousands of North Africans who have drowned trying to cross the Mediterranean to Europe, requires me just as much to recognize the hard reality that for so many of them, the end of the world already came and went.

With apologies to Vonnegut, history is not *Hamlet*. We are not sitting in the audience at the end of the play, left wondering what it all meant. Our vocation is not just to make sense of what has happened, but to develop ways of imagining and articulating how the planet's people can live together and what we owe to each other, and to do so not in the ideal, but in ways that can be made effective. That task has not suddenly become more urgent. But, I hope, it has swerved more unmistakably, more clearly, into view.

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Respecting a decision: The experts, the people, and the politicians

Peter Robinson

Peter Robinson has published aphorisms, short stories, literary criticism, a novel, and numerous books of poetry and translation for some of which he has been awarded the Cheltenham Prize, the John Florio Prize, and two Poetry Book Society Recommendations. He is Professor of English and American Literature at the University of Reading and poetry editor for Two Rivers Press.

When the then Italian Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, announced on Radio 24 in the aftermath of 23 June 2016: ‘rispetto la decisione del popolo Britannico’ (I respect the decision of the British people), my immediate thought was that I might have to *accept* the referendum result, but did not and could not *respect* it. I was jumping in my response between two senses of the verb ‘respect’, as from *OED* 6e, meaning ‘To uphold, maintain, refrain from violating (a right, privilege, law, decision, etc.)’ to *OED* 6b: ‘In favourable sense: to treat or regard with deference, esteem, or honour; to feel or show respect for.’ Yet this reflex play on the word might have been not so much a leap between different meanings as a punning assertion that in best circumstances the two may coincide – that you’ll abide by something because you admire it.

Similarly, when the now backbencher George Osborne said on the Andrew Marr show for the 18 December 2016 that ‘people in the end chose by a majority, a small majority, to leave the EU. I have to respect that’, his use of the ‘have to’ modal suggested it was not something within him that obliged him to respect it, for then he would have said that ‘I *must* respect’ it, but something external to him – though it can’t have been the will of the people that was obliging him to respect their will, but a pressure other than that will, whether it be the unwritten constitution, the customs and practices of politics in this country, or, perhaps, even, the spirit of democracy. Yet again, in best circumstances these two modal uses can coincide, when the felt internal compulsion, however much it derives from an external constraint, is held as an internally motivating conviction. Both of these instances of politicians speaking to and on the media also contain uses of the word ‘people’ which, in Renzi’s case, and that of many others in recent months, included the definite article determining its sense: ‘*the people*’.

In what follows I reflect speculatively on the nature and consequences of what may have been made manifest by the referendum decision, and do it by concentrating on uses of the verb ‘*respect*’, and the definite article in the creation of conceptual entities such as ‘*the experts*’, ‘*the people*’, and ‘*the politicians*’. In doing so, I hope to identify something of what might be involved in the exercise of a ‘democratic intellect’ and of its implications for political decision-making and legitimate authority. I speak with practically no experience of politics besides the literary and academic kinds, and little expert status, beyond some reputation as able to write, criticize, or translate poems – something that carries little weight beyond its own sphere. It’s not even

clear to me that I may count as one of ‘the people’, but perhaps you’ll graciously grant me the status of a person among ‘people’, something that experience and history has shown need not be granted in cases of, for instance, nationalistic and genocidal oppression.

The three definite entities in my subtitle are each differently derived, and thus different kinds of noun. ‘Expert’ began as an adjective (*OED* gives Chaucer’s *Troilus & Criseyde* c. 1374 as its earliest recorded usage) and emerged as a noun in the mid-nineteenth-century (earliest citation 1825, more common from the 1850s). Nouns derived from adjectives by adding the definite article are peculiarly vulnerable to prejudicial usage – as in ‘the poor’, ‘the green’, ‘the English’, ‘the disabled’, and may be proscribed, or at least discouraged, as a result. ‘Politician’ was already a derogatory noun in 1586, when it is recorded as meaning a ‘schemer or plotter’ (sense 1a). Sense 2a follows hard on its heels, meaning, interestingly enough, an ‘expert in the theory of politics’, and is likely to have been coextensive, for in 1589 George Puttenham, in *The Arte of English Poesie*, announces that poets ‘were the first lawmakers to the people, and the first polititiens, deuising all expedient meanes for th’establishment of Common wealth.’ The playwright John Ford in 1629 used ‘Politician’ to mean a ‘person who is keenly interested in practical politics, or who engages in party politics or political strife; now *spec.* one who is professionally involved in politics as the holder of or a candidate for an elected office.’ *OED* cautions that this usage in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries usually had ‘opprobrious overtones’. The word’s use with a definite article simply rounds into a category a group already defined by its role, and with negative implications from the start.

In the case of ‘people’ the difference between the indefinite and definite uses is dramatic and highlighted in the *OED* definitions: ‘people’ without an article having almost no political traction, ‘the people’ having, perhaps, too much. Deriving from medieval French, this word is in circulation in the 1300s, and by 1450 is being used with a definite article to mean ‘The whole body of citizens of a country, regarded as the source of political power or as the basis of society; *esp.* those qualified to vote in a democratic state, the electorate’ with the caution that it is frequently used ‘in the terminology of Communism and Socialism’ – though it is of note that the international strand in such movements required them to call upon the ‘workers’ of the world to unite, and not the ‘people’, for that word has its tincture of the ethnic and national ‘folk’. Differences in formation for the category uses derived from ‘expert’, ‘politician’, and ‘people’ also account for why the three definitive entities are not equal and exclusive, even when used as if they were, for they fit conceptually inside each other like Russian dolls: ‘the people’ being the largest, then ‘the politicians’, and then ‘the experts’.

One notable feature of politics in 2016 was how much it turned upon language use, as in Theresa May’s much-iterated tautology ‘Brexit means Brexit’ (meaning,

perhaps, that she was in need of a better dictionary definition – one that only future developments will presumably define). Liam Fox, again on the 18 December Andrew Marr Show, asked on the sofa ‘what is it about the word *democracy* that you don’t understand?’ The answer, which did not emerge, will have been the parts of the word’s definition that allowed for triumphalist crowing. This flurry of linguistic phenomena, one that might have kept Karl Kraus busy, were he living at this hour, was, perhaps, topped off by the choice of *post-truth* as the word of the year, a word whose definition (‘relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief’) doesn’t, to my mind, cover the implications of its hyphenated-prefix-style coinage – a compound haplessly keeping in touch with what it appears to leave behind.

A number of things arise from the play I noticed in uses of the verb ‘to respect’ as regards the referendum result. The first to address might be why I don’t and can’t respect it, while, ever since it happened, the victors have been urging me to respect ‘the will of the people’ – the more than implication being that not to do so is undemocratic, elitist, rather than, for instance, principled, as in the position adopted by Kenneth Clark. Yet the ‘remoaners’ or ‘remainiacs’, as they’ve been called, inhabitants of Remainia, those parts of the British Archipelago and Crown Territories that voted not to leave the EU, will be obliged, and indeed forced, to accept what has been characterized as a ‘decision’, though it wasn’t – and in this they will be at one with the Leavers, equally obliged to accept its consequences.

But in order to respect that so-called decision, and to see it as facilitating the mandate it was interpreted as providing, I would have to respect not only ‘the people’, to which I will return, but the political culture, the nature of the debate, the fairness of the arguments, and the integrity of the leaders, who had helped create the conditions for the decision and worked to produce a result and to benefit, or fail to benefit, from that outcome. This, be it noted, is not to cast blame on one side or the other, but to ask a question of the political culture that decided to change the direction of a composite state’s foreign and domestic policy in this fashion.

To respect the decision of the British people I would not have to believe that the decision was the right one, or that I happened to agree with it, but would have to be able to reconcile myself to it on the grounds that it was made by means of a ‘respectable’ process, made, for instance, as it might be, by well-informed people considering not only their own interests or the narrow interests of their country, but those of the continent to which that country belonged, the continent considered (as they were considering their own country) as not merely geography and culture but both of those things in a long history of political relations, and, to the place of that continent in the wider world. Nor let it be assumed in this I am taking it that those who don’t happen to be in the so-called metropolitan elites are not capable of being well informed, or that well-informed people could not believe that the United Kingdom’s future would be better served outside the European Union. This is not a

discussion about what would have been the right decision to make. It is a questioning of what would be the conditions for respecting any decision, in those two senses of the verb. I am far from alone in believing the conditions for respect of the referendum outcome were sufficiently created by the process that led to it.

This brings me to ‘the people’, an expression about which there have been long and vociferous debates – the problem focusing upon the fact it is a singularity that encompasses a multitude. The ‘will of the people’ means that in such a plebiscite a bare majority is converted into a synecdoche for the entirety. It might be worth a reminder, too, that ‘the British people’ as a synecdoche is a state concept, and not, ever more manifestly, a national or patriotic one. It is worth recalling because conventional usage repeatedly occludes this, as when George Eaton in any early January 2017 issue of *The New Statesman* observed: ‘there is no evidence that the country regrets supporting Brexit’. Here, ‘the country’ is a further synecdoche that overlooks its not being a single country, and, as we are repeatedly reminded, at least one of the countries doesn’t regret supporting Brexit, because it didn’t. The state, entire, including some of its territories (such as Gibraltar), though not all of them (such as the Channel Islands), will then be compelled to accept the result as a decision, and to accept the decision as binding. Neither of these things need have followed, but it was decided (though not by ‘the people’) that they would – and we are now repeatedly required to respect that too, as can be seen by those who had opposed going to the law to clarify who has the right to trigger Article 50.

A further point about ‘the people’ is that it can be used to mean, especially in revolutionary conditions, those other than the leaders, that dictatorship of the proletariat, who believe they know what’s best for the people, with a tendency to slide into nationalistic tyranny evident in twentieth-century politics. This kind of usage can inflect the talk of politicians from all persuasions. Yet politicians are ‘the people’ too, and if we are to respect the people’s decision, we need to respect them as well. Once again, I’m not sure conditions for that were met, and I don’t say this to make a distinction between one faction and the other – for on most sides, with the exception of The Green Party and a few other still small voices, fear was the spur, and self-interest practically the only game in town.

Another thing to say about ‘the people’ in the referendum is that they were, and are, by no means all the people living in the country on that day in 2016. They were the resident British with the right to hold passports who had reached the appropriate age and registered to vote. It did not include, for instance, EU citizens married to British nationals and with residence rights in the country who work here and pay taxes. No taxation without representation, announced the American colonists in their quarrel with the British state; but here a great many contributors to the financial and other well-beings of these islands were not entitled to have their say on so momentous a question. Nor were British passport holders who had lived for a significant period of

time outside British Crown Territories. These electoral rules served to shape the electorate, 'the people' in this sense, in the direction of the eventual folk-inflected outcome.

Such thoughts also arise from differences in the meaning of the word 'people' with or without a definite article, for it can signify both those who reside in the archipelago and the electorate of the UK, with the former being taken for the latter and their will in the referendum. This amounted to a narrow majority of 1, 269, 501 in a total electorate of 46, 500,001 from a current population estimated at 65.1 million in June 2015, a statistic that happened to be released on the referendum voting day. As the pie charts show, this made for a very narrow majority from a strong turnout, some 72% of the electorate, but a tiny minority of 100% of the likely underestimated population of 12 months before, when net immigration over the following year, we were reminded, touched 300,000. This is not to cast the blame as regards who did or didn't win, but to note why 'respect' for the result may be harder to achieve than the victors would wish, and why the called-for unity in making the best of Brexit may prove a phantasm.

There is a further reason why respect need not accompany acceptance. The playwright and sometime Bedlamite Nathaniel Lee (c. 1653 – 6 May 1692) will forever be remembered for having written in a missive from his asylum: 'They called me mad, and I called them mad, and damn them, they outvoted me'. It has never been the case that matters of truth and falsehood, let alone prudent decision-making, can be definitively adjudicated by a majority of votes. Juries in courts sometimes come to the wrong decision. Once again, respect for the 'will' of the British people on the 23 of June, as distinct from an acceptance of a narrow numerical 'win', would have to derive from the quality of what they did, the conditions of knowledge and information upon which the choice was made, and, perhaps most importantly, the values that were expressed in their coming to that choice. Democracy has its rights, but it isn't always in the right, or right: even the notorious German dictator who shall remain nameless won *one* election.

'The people' are 'people' too, as George Osborne's article-free usage on the Andrew Marr Show reminded us. Each of them has individual reasons to think what they do, and vote as they will. It has been suggested that there was a large degree of 'protest' voting, by which must be meant that the conditions whereby the electorate respected the politicians, who would go on to use their choice as a mandate, were not present; and the message that they were sending about being economically and culturally left behind might have been, and will need to be, responded to in ways that may not be met by the policy direction they have gifted to some of their politicians.

Yet the thoughts and feelings, the anger and protest of each and everyone of these voters is, I would suggest, what needs respecting – and it isn't respected by a successful cabal's bundling of divisive difference into a 'mandate' derived from a bare majority. This is why it became clear in the hectic and heated weeks leading up

to the referendum, that the only thing which might conceivably have settled the matter, once and for all, as the referendum was bruited as doing, would be a substantially decisive vote, a landslide, as it were, on one or the other side – and this is precisely what didn't happen, which makes the subsequent use of the expression 'the will of the British people', by the victors, so unpersuasive.

Now, are the politicians experts? They are those 'expert in the theory of politics' according to *OED* definition 2b for the noun. Michael Gove's now notorious remark, made around the 10th of June 2016, that 'the British people have had enough of experts' recalled for me an assertion from Brussels by a Eurosceptic on BBC radio in about 2004 that 'the British people have had enough literature' – meaning, of course, bureaucratic paperwork and not poems, novels, or plays. Gove did not, presumably, include himself among those denigrated 'experts'. The populist strategy here was to attribute expert status to others, including politicians you oppose, while simultaneously associating yourself with 'the people' by the act of excluding yourself from the class of experts. Yet when speaking with authority to the population, that same politician will be setting himself up as an expert and using the position of an MP to exercise authority. Politicians, too, will slide between acting for the people and being of the people: the curious frisson in seeing a prime minister casting a vote – a photo opportunity – or seeing an ex-cabinet minister performing on a talent show illustrating how our leaders and representatives are sometimes 'the politicians', sometimes 'the people', and also 'people' – that vulnerable plural without definite article.

The same may be said for experts: some of them can simultaneously be politicians, people, and, also, members of that politically charged entity 'the people'. Had the triggering of Article 50 been part of the Royal Prerogative, and the government, for foreign-diplomacy reasons, been free not to conduct a running commentary, then there should never have been a referendum – because if these decisions are not for parliament to make then they can't be for the people either. The people are, in any case, currently obliged to concede the leaving and arriving derived from that memorable neologism which I won't reiterate to some of 'the politicians'.

It is to all them, though, in their roles as parliamentarians that we must entrust our hopes that the practicalities of withdrawal from the European Union will be conducted in such a way that sovereignty will be returned to Parliament and respect for that process of negotiation be possible. For we must hope and assume that some of 'the politicians', namely the current government, are consulting 'the experts' from sectors of industry, the legal profession, the civil service, and, much as they may seem to dislike it, the politicians with local expertise from Gibraltar, Northern Ireland, Eire, as well as the politicians of the devolved Scotland, and Wales as well.

Perhaps it might be of help to consider the problem of the experts and their authority in a democracy by looking at the Institutional Theory of Art and its criticism. This focuses down onto the question, when considering Carl André's bricks, for instance, whether we have to believe they are a great work of art because the experts at the Tate told us so, or because they have good reasons for so telling us. If we are to believe them because they are experts it is only their institutional power to enforce their decision about what is or isn't art that holds sway; but if they have reasons, then we don't have to believe the experts, because we can respect those reasons. Even if we don't agree with their evaluations, we can see how they came to them.

The institutional theory of art is flawed, but useful because it draws attention to the role of socially instituted powers in the conferring of 'art' status on objects that need not appear to have the recognized characteristics of this category. Richard Wollheim's criticism of it, derived from David Hume's knock-down argument regarding God's omniscience and omnipotence, is that if the instituted power gives its reasons for why this or that object can be called art, and these reasons convince the non-experts, then those latter non-experts do not need to bow to the authority of those with instituted power, because they can accept the reasons, and if they aren't convinced by the reasons, then they are only respecting the attributing authority out of fear, which in turn shows it has no right other than force. This is to say that, in line with the evolution of the noun 'experts', we do need people who are adjectivally expert, but their status as experts is dependent upon their manifesting that quality and it may be withdrawn.

The relevant point about such arguments is that people may accept their validity and *respect* their consequences, even when their preferences and feelings are challenged or thwarted. This is why the question should never be whether the person speaking is an expert, but what the strength of the case being made is, and the validity of the supporting evidence. Yet Gove's discrediting of experts was not a singular, watershed moment in the history of British politics; it was the thick end of a long wedge that goes back at least to the denigration of the so-called 'chattering classes' during the 1980s, and the long attack upon trust in the education professions in and out of universities and schools – something for which Gove was also briefly responsible. The relationship of this denigrating of those who know something because they do it, as distinct from those who manage their doing it, can be readily related to privatization policy and the current, though flawed, triumph of the market as an only too visible invisible hand.

*

To be expert is not a guarantee of being right either. I've always liked the economist Joan Robinson's joke that academics in her profession don't need to worry about the annual chore of inventing examination questions – because every year they can ask the same question, but every year the answer is different. William Empson memorably asserted in 'Courage Means Running' that 'the economists raise /

Bafflement to a boast we all take as guard'. Between these words the problems of being an expert in 'the dismal science' are broadly acknowledged, and the danger of professional hubris noted. Meteorologists are also experts but, I take it, no one expects them to be infallible – while the innumerable variables involved don't stop them aiming to be as accurate and honest as they can. There are no fewer variables in economics. Both professions are speculating and forecasting without any security that events will bear them out. What's more, economists with advisory or managerial powers intervene in, and are thus part of, the data far more than do meteorologists.

It is never sufficient to point to the experts on banking practice, or risk analysis, or to the pollsters, and say that because they failed to predict the Wall Street or 2008 Crashes, or failed to foresee a Conservative victory in 2015, or Hillary Clinton's defeat the following year, that we don't need them any more. Being expert on something does not confer infallibility. To lose faith in them because they have been wrong is to misunderstand the grounds for their 'expert' status. What such status does confer, and they do, in general, tend to practice, is an obligation to honesty and a capacity to acknowledge failure, and to reflect upon it, as a means to improving practice and reasoning. Experts are only that because of their finite knowledge, practice, experience and skill, and they too are 'people' in that they can be as mistaken as politicians and anyone else. They are also as in need of understanding. The professional humiliation of 'experts' through misuse by power (think of David Kelly and his fate) may be as disastrous as when 'the people' are misled by 'the politicians' – not because they are especially likely to be right or wrong, but because their identity as expert depends upon their *respect* for improving knowledge.

For a political decision made in a democracy to be respectable it is necessary that the conduct of the election campaign and the linguistic behaviour of the politicians has to respect not only *the people*, as an entity rhetorically to manipulate, but also *people*, people as they are, in all their vulnerability to exploitation by those with power over them. It is only if the political processes in a democracy defend people against their manipulation by media or propaganda, from misrepresentation and spin by whoever, and understand the individual predicaments of people and their reasons for acting and voting as they do, that the choices they make and what follows from them, because fair in their processes, can be respectable and respected.

The great danger facing the politicians in the coming years, and especially those who have benefitted from their narrow win in the referendum, is that they will be presiding over a composite state that contains a large majority of further disillusioned people. While it is fairly clear that the respect for the principles of democracy, however poorly manifested, have obliged many from the 48% to accept the outcome of the referendum and look on with a growing sorrow and anger as the consequences of that honourable respect for a principle unfold, it is rather less clear that the same 48% have been won over by the arguments, such as they were, of those against whom they are said to have lost. They still don't and can't respect the outcome, even though they do have to accept it. That this slightly less than half the

population includes a majority of net contributors to this state's tax revenues is a further reason why 'leave' politicians may have cause for future anxiety regarding the unforeseen consequences of their actions.

The strong likelihood that withdrawing from the European Union will not be a quick fix for those parts of the British isles that qualify for the term 'left behind' will be a severe blow for the less well-off of the 52%, and a blow waiting to fall. Add these two fractions together, along with the numbers among those who live here but were not entitled to vote, and you may have before you a large majority of people differently disillusioned with the political culture of the United Kingdom. Some of the politicians will need to be very expert to avoid this consequence stemming from a process of decision-making that has failed to win the respect of many.

Yet I'm not inclined entirely to despair, for, however difficult and unpredictable the future is, we are not living in the era of 'post-truth' politics – even if 'post-truth' was last year's word – not least because, as I say, the term pays tribute to the continuing existence and value of what it appears to claim has been left behind. Truth will out, as a poet once wrote, and in time it will serve towards a judgment upon whoever happens, and for whatever ends, to have played fast and loose with its telling.

15 February 2017

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Four poems

by Peter Robinson

Belongings

'Les jours s'en vont je demeure'

Guillaume Apollinaire

Staying in Europe, as you do,
now on a train from Milan
we happen upon two Belgian girls
with strawberries, a ball of wool
and a copy of Apollinaire's *Alcools*
(one quotes 'Le pont Mirabeau');
two teenage girls off to see the world,
they're going as far as Istanbul.
So when our train makes Parma station,
we're wishing them a '*Bon vacance!*'
and they reply, '*You too!*'

Staying in Europe a week or two,
we're entranced by reddish leaves
when candy-floss blossoms envelope
this area's fragrant airs
and there's even a duck on the foul-
smelling flow of its old canal,
a lesser celandine
amidst the dandelions and daisies,
their meadow a greener green –
as if the in-two-minds of Europe
were fighting it out through you.

For despite the many money calculations,
scare-mongering or true, what's true
is we belong among these homes
(the popular housing of post-war years)
beyond a confetti of magnolia petals
scattered over mossy lawns
while some still cling to their garden boughs
in different or indifferent times ...
and staying in Europe, as we intend to do.

3 April 2016

Balkan Trilogy

In memory of Geoffrey Hill

'prega per Europa'

Vittorio Sereni

1. PASSPORT STAMPS

There's something about those rock outcrops
along the tops above Dubrovnik,
bloodied, fallen oranges
in the moat around what was Ragusa –
something about a switchback mountain
road that leads inland
(mist rising from a reservoir lake
after temperature-changing rain;
bridge pillars emerging from it
as if from out of nowhere) –
something about an exclamation-mark road sign
when we cross more Dayton borders

and the words
switch back and forth between Roman and Cyrillic –
there's something can't but point towards
past damage, harms to come ...

2. NIKSIC HOTEL

Like a convalescent from this month of claim
and counter-claim, I falter
coming down to breakfast, seeing as the same
worn carpet would soon alter
when overwhelmed by risen shame
I find no shelter
from the Montenegrin sun's heat, or from casting blame
in a welter
of muffled shouts, disorientation,
hearing news that wrecks it –
plain omelette, bread and tea become
tasteless as the one word *nation* ...
Not knowing where to turn for home,
I return to my room through the door marked EXIT.

3. HERCEG NOVI

As in a bereavement, when those harms
from your loss are falling
into place with relief at some more evening breeze,
under the prom's transplanted palms
beside seafront concessions
there come, with raucous darts of starlings
at dusk above the old town's eaves,
sensible inward migrations ...
So from a balcony, soon after sunrise,

no less at home here, you see
the spectral headlands jutting out in an isolated sea
and can hardly believe your eyes.

30 June 2016

Lincolnshire Landscapes

for Peter Makin

‘... there is a constant sense, as in a Dutch landscape,
of how the road leads on beyond the visible horizon.’

Richard Wollheim

1

Farmed deer – they’re venison under rain –
bound off on balletic points;
but we’re about to lose our way
with a box-pew church ahead,
its east end silhouetted
up against rain-laden sky –
the pockmarked, ochre stonework bitten
in by centuries of frost.

2

Under big skies of the Lincolnshire Wolds
when driven down field-skirting roads,
I’m grateful for that constant sense
of how they lead beyond
the visible horizon, land

moved across our windscreen frame,
our windscreen smeared by summer's extinctions;
it's shot through with reflections
the overlaid experiences
like sands rippling along a shore ...

3

the shore at Mablethorpe, for instance,
with its razor-shells, hundreds and thousands,
and wind, wind speaking in tongues
of streaming sands –
wraiths blown towards a steely sea
break, break, breaking under iron-grey cloud forms,
where figures, patterns on that beach,
point off towards more ghost propellers
over beyond the Wash, you see,
or Humber estuary.

4

Leaving the big red VOTE LEAVE signs
behind us in a homing turn,
we find the B-roads lead beyond
where abandonment, abjection, it will have them choose;
it's figured in those FOR SALE boards,
and what of language, person, coast
emerges now we are to lose
ourselves beyond the turning lines
from a lost horizon ...

Post-Truth

Now this year's word's a tribute
to the thing it leaves behind,
or thinks to do, mistakenly;

for truth is like a Lazarus
rising from its grave-clothes
to judge each diverse ruse.

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An outsider in 'Brexitland': Some observations

Gerald Dawe

Gerald Dawe is an Irish poet and professor of English at Trinity College Dublin. He was Visiting Scholar at Pembroke College, Cambridge (2016-17). His most recent publications include Selected Poems (2012), Mickey Finn's Air (2014) and Of War and War's Alarms: Reflections on Modern Irish Writing (2015).

31 January, 2017

I think the best way for me to address the subject of the seminar is to account for why an Irish poet and professor of English at Trinity College Dublin is here in the first place. Last May – the 23rd to be precise – the arts and humanities research centre at Trinity, the Long Room Hub, hosted a discussion on Brexit, a full month before the referendum took place (23 June). I was one of the speakers, my task to reflect on the long journey towards peace in Northern Ireland – of which I have some knowledge – and how this could be jeopardised by Brexit.

But I was also asked to think about the use of language in the debate surrounding Brexit and what could be interpreted as 'unforeseen consequences' – the title of my short paper.

My co-speakers included the British Ambassador to Ireland, Dominick Chilcott, Dr Etain Tannam, a lecturer in Peace Studies at Trinity, Professor Eunan O'Halpin, director of Trinity Centre in Contemporary Irish History (and an authority on political and diplomatic relations between Ireland and Britain) and in the chair was Professor Jane Ohlmeyer, author of the major study, *Making Ireland English: the Irish aristocracy in the Seventeenth Century*.

The reason why I'm bothering with these local details is to illustrate a simple initial point – that the panel taking part in this discussion was taking the subject very seriously – if not in a sombre mood – and so doing even though the actual referendum was in another country in which we had no vote, except, that is, for the Ambassador!

The Thomas Davis Lecture Theatre was packed to capacity with over two hundred people, many of them young, many of them, as we would hear in the discussion, were English living in Ireland, and some Irish living in Britain. In one contribution, an English visitor to Dublin who was passing through and heard about the debate and simply dropped by, asked: 'Why are we not having this kind of discussion back in Britain, it's so refreshing to hear this in place of the rancour at home'. Or words to that effect. So there we were, a month before the referendum and this is what I said:

II

Eighteen years ago the Good Friday Agreement that was overwhelmingly endorsed by the people in Ireland, put paid to a very dark and bitter quarter of a century of violence and political acrimony that we have consigned to history as 'the Troubles'. It's hardly feasible to think today that in the late 1960s a democratic movement for civil rights would spiral out of control from street protest and popular demands for economic and cultural justice into such a shocking conflict between terrorism and state force that would lead to the deaths of thousands of ordinary men, women and children. We know this story well and I'm not going to rehearse it tonight save to make the simple point that behind the protracted discussions, arguments, debates and difficulties of the years since, the Good Friday Agreement has set a generation largely free from violence, both physical and verbal. My fear is that this hard-won and costly political achievement could unravel at the behest of what is increasingly being seen as an incoherent, ill-conceived and, at times, nasty racist debate about Brexit. At the heart of this debate there seems to be a serious and potentially hugely damaging ignorance about what might happen should the British electorate decide to leave the European Union. Listen to what the chairman of the 'Vote Leave' campaign had to say about the issue of frontier controls and custom checks - i.e. the international border that would be put in place between the EU and the UK, a border that would run across the northern counties of Ireland: Derry, Fermanagh, Tyrone, Armagh and Down/ Louth, Monaghan, Leitrim, Cavan and Donegal:

'...checks would be needed along the Border to prevent illegal immigration. That could be stopped. There would have to be border controls, but not a prevention of genuine Irish coming in'.

There would be, I guess, forty or so crossing points - what used to be known as 'unapproved roads' - in the interface between Louth and Down. So do the maths and you can begin to see the farce this is all leading to, not to mention the phrase of 'letting the 'genuine Irish coming in'. With a shillelagh under me arm, no doubt, and a twinkle in me eye. The lack of basic historical knowledge is baffling but clearly self-serving. Another government campaigner for the Leave side is reported as saying that Brexit could see 'an end to the open border between the two parts of Ireland' and is quoted as boldly stating:

'If you're worried about border controls and security...you couldn't leave a back door without some kind, either of checks there with any country or assurances in relation to the checks that they're conducting, obviously. Otherwise, everyone with ill will towards this country [UK] would go round that route'.

'Obviously' isn't really the word; it defies logic that anyone with a titter of wit would know that the border in Ireland has been for almost one hundred years a scar on the body politic which we have only very recently started to heal with the balm of common sense and years of very hard work on the ground.

To retreat from this still delicately balanced issue because you are ensconced in the internal battles for the high ground of your political party and like the sound of your own voice, is utterly foolhardy and irresponsible.

But Brexit isn't about Ireland. And wouldn't be, were it not for the 'special relationship' between the various parts of these islands and not just Ireland and England. Indeed I'm not even sure, after all is said and done, if Brexit is not actually about a deepening sense of disaffection with itself in mainstream English society.

The driving force behind Brexit is London-based power politics. What happens in Jonesborough or Forkhill or Pettigo is a very long way away. And that's exactly the mistake that could come to haunt this referendum. But there is also a very troubling element to the language of the debate in England.

From an outsider's point of view, I am shaken by the toxic and dangerous racist element that leading figures of the Leave side introduced into what should be a lively and important democratic debate.

It staggers belief to think how phrases like 'genuine Irish' are used so casually or the hugely publicised doubts expressed by the ex-mayor of London about the racial origins of Barack Obama's opinions on Brexit or the shameful comparison by the ex-Mayor of London, of EU bureaucrats with Hitler and the Nazi Third Reich's decimation of Europe.

What would have played out if similar terms had been hurled about publicly in the hothouse of Northern Irish parliamentary debate is difficult to imagine. But perhaps it is, from this distance, the lack of a robust civic leadership surrounding the referendum that could well produce unforeseen circumstances - something which we will all have to deal with for years to come and I'm not just talking about the murky

aftermath of a resurrected border in Ireland.

The snide innuendoes of a 'Little Englander' nostalgia for imperial grandeur, mocked-up by so-called plain-speaking ordinary blokes who tell it like it is, needs to be challenged by mature and reasonable arguments.

For, as we know, there are important matters at stake here - about security and immigration, integration and civil rights; but also about bureaucratic power and the deepening suspicions of a European elite as self-perpetuating. However, the maturity and experience that even a little history brings to the table would help, rather than so much bluff and bluster that the 'Leave' campaign is leaving in its wake.

The Republic of Ireland joined up to Europe almost fifty years ago. If there is an alternative in the next fifty years for these islands, then spell it out? Let's hear how we can do business differently, politically, economically, culturally? I doubt there is such a rationale. But the one thing that is becoming increasingly more obvious is that the current Leave campaign is sounding strident, silly, contradictory and ill-informed on what exactly will happen should their campaign succeed. If however we repeat some very dangerous mistakes from the past, particularly in the way we address each other - that in anyone's language, could spell disaster.

III

That was the speech and a short time later it surfaced in a slightly revised and retrospective version in a pamphlet *English after Brexit*, along with contributions from among others, Peter Robinson, edited by the distinguished academic Adrian Barlow and published by the English Association. What I'd like to do now is revisit some of the points I touched upon there, considering what it looks like as an outsider who is currently and temporarily living in what will eventually be 'Brexitland'.

I'd also like to register as best as I can and as good-heartedly as possible, my responses to what happened, and is happening, between the referendum decision of last summer and roughly how things look today.

This is not an academic paper but a gathering of anecdotes and impressions which record my own struggle to find some kind of intellectual bearing on where we – or maybe that should be 'you' – are presently as a culture; a culture which heavily influenced my own educational and moral upbringing in post-war Belfast of the 1950s and 60s.

That I spent a good bit of time during the late 1980s, 1990s and early years of this century in various parts of Europe, giving poetry readings and lectures and attending conferences including in the former 'east' European countries, and that as an Irish citizen I am and will remain, as my passport says in Irish, part of 'An tAontas Eorpach' – a member of the European Union all this will strongly influence what follows. It will probably come as little surprise that I'll be drawing attention to the critical presence of George Orwell and in particular one of his greatest essays, 'Politics and the English Language' written over seventy years ago and published in 1946, as Britain was stabilising itself after the wreckage of WW2 and facing into questioning realignments with leading world powers including the US and, of course, the Soviet Union. The 'present political chaos' he wrote back then, 'is connected with the decay of language, and that one can probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end'.

IV

There is little point in my rehearsing the specific arguments of the Brexit debate here, suffice to say that on any level of detail they have melted into the abstract and, as Orwell remarks: 'no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of *words* chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of *phrases* tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house'.

Language, as he asserted, 'becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts'.

As Dennis Kennedy, former deputy editor of *The Irish Times* stated recently, 'to keep repeating "Brexit means Brexit" and "The people have spoken" when we still have no clear idea of what it will really mean, is inane and irresponsible'. Indeed the fact that we are no wiser on the strategy to extricate Britain from its almost half-century within the European community makes it all the more baffling to note the democratic passivity that has followed in the wake of the referendum recommendation.

What strikes me most forcibly however has been the continuing *tone* of the discussions. The noxious quality of so much that was said in the media is now merging more and more into the fabric of mainstream public discourse in a fashion that is unimaginable to one who has witnessed the so-called 'populism' at first hand in the bigoted language that fuelled much of the Northern Irish conflict.

There is nothing 'funny' about Farage and his side-kicks who remind me so much of the sectarian bully-boys of the past, that to pretend otherwise, as Cameron did, that these people were in some way 'beneath him' was a fatal error which led indirectly to

Cameron's failure in the referendum gamble. It also exposed the complacency and arrogance of those in England who thought they had the referendum in the bag.

They didn't, as we know, because the lower orders were beaver away, with a class-based, or class-inflected sense of grievance in their hearts, funded seriously by various business and political interests with their own targeted objectives, and not some ill-defined 'cultural' vision of it being 'better' being European. In not getting into this rough-house side of the debate Labour's failure, or so it seems from the outside, was sealed.

But what catches me out more and more, now that I'm living here when I listen to the strident tones of the Leave faction now in government, is just how insecure they are about what they are actually doing.

It brings to mind the bluster of the Thatcherite Tory past of the 1980s and the disasters which befell ordinary folks from their blundering and incoherent ideological decision-making, including the juvenile shadow-boxing and shape-throwing of anti-EC (as then was) posturing.

The infamous early rejection by Thatcher in 1983-4 of the New Ireland Forum and Garrett Fitzgerald, the Irish prime minister's proposals for Northern Ireland: 'Out', 'Out', 'Out'. Only to concede and shape and sign up for the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, comes to mind. The Poll Tax debacle of 1989-90 which led ultimately to her fall from power. The repeated denials of culpability surrounding Bloody Sunday. The dire failure of English diplomacy regarding the Hunger Strikes in 1980-81 which led directly to the revitalisation of the IRA campaign and another fifteen years of shocking violence.

Not much here to inspire one with confidence in the Tory party's ability to negotiate their way out of a wet paper bag, never mind the complicated labyrinths of EU legislation and commercial relations of four decades. The question that was not asked, and has *not* been asked (possibly for patriotic reasons) is stark enough: which diplomatic or political initiative undertaken by a Conservative Government in the period of EU-membership, offers outstanding proof of their collective ability to provide a positive outcome for post-Brexit England? Notwithstanding all the huff-and-puff of economic shackles being unbound, is there unimpeachable evidence that Britain will reclaim some Valhalla of economic prosperity denied to it by ill-disposed Brussels mandarins? Does anyone really, seriously believe this to be the case?

I have spent many years in the company of Europeans from all over the continent, from smaller countries to the leading and larger, who revere this country and its culture and history; none are impressed by the egotism of some misfiring politicians or the grand-standing of zealots but that is the case with their own who act in this fashion throughout Europe.

There is a sense that Brexit, which has not happened yet, could enter into the lists of Tory disasters unless parliament doesn't become much more active alongside the wider civil society. Certainly from an outsider's point of view it appeared that Farage was the leader of a powerful body of opinion in Westminster and not the one-time leader of his ex-party that boasts one MP!

The nasty language of racism and the voicing of religious prejudice that are now becoming authorised in part by this referendum is something that multi-cultural Britain has to challenge much more coherently. Incitement to hatred is incitement to hatred after all is said and done. Orwell again: 'When the general atmosphere is bad, language must suffer...But if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought'.

For instance, it's pointless merely referring to 'waves of reaction' or 'the rise of populism' spreading across Europe or in the US as some kind of automaton-like mantra. To 'think clearly', Orwell reminds us, 'is a necessary first step towards political regeneration: so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers'.

V

The Brexit row has done certain good if it has alerted people to what lies under the surface of this society but this awareness cannot be revoked from the outside. This brings me to a very curious point about the extent to which outside knowledge, advice and/or witness was *not* included in the run-up to and post Brexit discussions. The negativity surrounding the very term 'Europe' and 'European' is noticeable to anyone less invested in the cultural stereotypes of England and the English.

The coverage of BBC is a case in point. Nightly news stories referring to the *European* 'refugee' crisis involving Syria, Afghanistan and other war-ravaged societies, overlooks the fact that this is a *humanitarian* disaster that has produced, though stretched to breaking point, the best of heroic efforts of both Greek and Italian medical and defence forces, aided by fellow EU countries such as Ireland. But somehow this is being seen as 'their' (EU) problem.

Conversely on a totally different, and trivial level entirely, a news item enthusiastically refers to how a young and promising English-born footballer might well leave the Premier League because of lucrative offers from 'the continent', not 'Europe' mark you!

Notwithstanding the tosh of June 23rd being a British Independence Day the referendum did produce a curate's egg of a result. Douglas Kennedy again: 'in a Vote for leave, only 38% of "the people" (the total electorate) voted to leave, with about 34% to remain. Does that in itself constitute a mandate for the biggest constitutional change in 43 years?' *Discuss!*

Certain matters *are* clear all these months after the vote. 'Following Brexit' as a phrase used in ongoing reference to Britain's economic performance is wrong. Brexit hasn't happened. A referendum on leaving the EU has taken place but the actual reality of Britain not being in the European Union has emphatically not impacted yet but the media and others continue to maintain the fiction that it has; but so what? Who really cares if the British union breaks up, leaving in its wake four relatively distinct nations to get on as best as they can with each other?

England will continue as England in some form or another. Its role on the world stage that some fantasise about – particularly the series of failed Tory leaders and/or previous (failed) contenders who are manning-up the Brexit-side – will be predicated upon the unfolding saga on the other side of the Atlantic and the drip-drip of further revelations about 'Russia's' revived influence in English and North American politics, all in an effort to undermine the powerful democratic community of European nations.

You can play with that scenario in as many different ways as you like but what cannot be gainsaid is the absolute and clear failure of the English governing class to *plan* for post-referendum Britain. There was no plan A; never mind a Plan B.

Where this leaves the relatively undernourished issue of intellectual and cultural debate in this democracy is hard to know. Language and self-image in political life has merged into the corporate world of media to such an extent that even an abusive use as an electioneering poster of the dire plight of thousands of Syrian families, escapes any legal or moral censure.

Outrage at such conduct does not work; nor irony, nor mocking. There is no shortcut but hard work on the ground and the implementation of strong and effective legal and legislative recourse to the courts to clear (at least from the public airwaves) the dog-whistling racism as much as the ranting. The fact that there's two sides (or more) to every negotiating table seems to have simply been erased from public discourse as if 'England' is negotiating with itself and not the actual world out there. Sound-bites and tweets may work for momentary visibility but real people pay at the other end if clearly-defined and practical options aren't in place.

My gut feeling is that in the present climate and given the current anti-intellectual mood of the country, the promises being stored up *for* and *by* those who voted on an each-way bet that Brexit would give to post-industrial communities a sense of restored dignity and respect, is forlorn. The patronisingly-named 'JAM' – just about managing – will not see one iota of improvement as a result of Brexit.

It took about twenty hard years for the northern peace process to take root and settle in since 1998. There are still tracts of unfulfilled, unfillable wishes and dreams of those who continue to harbour some kind of a political return to a past in which they

imagined a simpler, changeless life and due comfort. That won't happen though the occasional spasms of division in Northern Ireland still produce mini-crises. As regards Britain, I can't see where the political and diplomatic experience and intellectual energy is coming from in the present assembly at Westminster or who will provide real leadership for the generation to come, but I hope I'm wrong for all our sakes. On the other hand, things might just muddle along at first, at any rate. As I've referred to Orwell let me finish these musings on an Orwellian riff and a nod in the direction of a prediction:

London will become the overall dominant city-state with the rest of England and Wales substantially dependent upon on its financial services for substantial foreign capital and investment. Scotland will negotiate dual-citizenship with EU membership along with Northern Ireland, as increasingly more people follow the currently high volume of individual applications for Irish nationality (75,000 in the UK in the past six months; and a potential 2.1 million qualify!). Nothing much will have really changed, except for the fact that 'Europe' can no longer be held responsible for any of the economic and/or political challenges/crises that the recalibrated Britain of England and Wales experience. Many universities will announce plans to amalgamate (or face closure) and the elite colleges commit ever more resources attracting highly educated leadership cadres from China, India and other non-EU countries as compensation for Erasmus and equivalent exchanges programmes that have run out of time and funding.

Twenty years from now who can tell what will be the outcome of the referendum last June and whether anything seriously fundamental will have changed in this society for the good of all those who voted either to leave the 'EU' or to remain. Remember Orwell's injunction - 'to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration', which is more than enough to be going on with, in my book.

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Three poems by Gerald Dawe

Refugees

The map you drew on a napkin was Old Europe -
the rough edges, borders; the spaces, countries.
Up above, the hotel purred with delight.
Happy tourists rolled home to their breezy bedrooms.
The sea lapped over black volcanic shores
and all about us the hills stood vigilant.

You see, the Slavs were forever struggling
against the Central Powers ...

Your words trailed off as the coloured lights
played ever so slightly and a pack of dogs
chased each other around the fishing boats.
Deep down in the swimming pool
a wasted army called for air and food and shelter.

Quartz

for Katrina Goldstone

So there is something I want to know,
great-grandmother, reclining on whichever
foreign shore or ambrosial meadow,
taking a second look at the old place –

the valiant village, the provincial district,
the back-breaking hill-climb to the apartment,
the quiet evening square in this country town
or that frontier post, down by the coastal resort

of some famous lake, say, with Roman baths,
or a minority language – I want to know
who your grand fame was, or paterfamilias,
disembarking in a draughty shed, thinking

Liverpool or Belfast was really New York,
blinking in the greyish light of a noisy dawn,
looking out for rooming houses, a decent hotel,
putting one foot in front of the other,

taking the first right and walking, walking,
past the shipping offices and custom houses,
the rattling trams and carters and mill girls,
the steep factories and squat churches till the hills

converge upon this three-storied terrace
with the curtains drawn, the bell-pull shining,
and you pull the bell-pull and in whatever
English you'd learned you stepped in.

Snap

Emigrant family leaving Derry, 1930s

If I had known I would have kept this picture
on the mantelpiece of each home we had.
The two of them could hardly stand still, her shy
as anything and the young lad held fast
to his daddy's hand. Our tickets were in the other.
The day was cool enough, a mist settled
and the engines churned and churned. It felt
as if we were on the land and the land on either side
was distant, foreign. I couldn't believe we were going.
The kids looked this way and that until the open sea,
nothing but the sea, and I thought my heart would break.

© Gerald Dawe Selected Poems (Oldcastle: Gallery Press 2012)

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